

[By Brent Curtis, Rutland Herald](#)

WHITE RIVER JUNCTION – Rep. Peter Welch heard almost as many complaints from supporters of health care reform as he did from its opponents during a public forum Saturday.

Standing before an audience of roughly 100 inside the Hartford High School theater, the Democratic congressman found himself defending his support for emerging legislation not only from those who believe it goes too far, but from those who think it doesn't go far enough.

"I am dead set against individual mandates," said a Duxbury man who said he supported health care for all as a "duty" to others. "I don't want to give any of my money to those corrupt (insurance companies)."

Another woman, who told the assembly that those who didn't support health care as a right had "lost sight of the public good," asked Welch to pledge not to vote for any legislation that did not include a public insurance option.

"It will be my obligation when a bill gets to that point to use my best judgment to decide whether this bill – which is guaranteed to fall short of most of what this room wants – is a bill I will support," Welch said in response to her request.

The gathering represented the second and final part of a listening tour that started in Williston, where 150 attended Welch's forum Oct. 10 at the Williston Central School.

While it was hard to find anyone Saturday wholly satisfied with reform bills taking shape in the U.S. House and Senate, the demeanor of speakers on both sides of the issue was far more civil than has been seen in some similar venues in other states.

While health care reformers made up the majority of the audience – with a healthy turnout of sign-waving supporters from a group seeking a single-payer system in Vermont – there were at least a dozen reform opponents in the room who made their points through well-articulated objections and raucous applause to any contrary viewpoints that were raised.

For example, after Welch made the argument that if health care were a publicly owned entity, Vermonters and Americans in general would never allow the high salaries that health insurance chief executive officers currently make, one man challenged the congressman to explain why Vermont hadn't reeled in those same CEOs through the Department of Banking, Insurance, Securities and Health Care Administration.

"I feel like health care would be run like Amtrak if the government took over," the man said.

But Welch said health insurance companies enjoy legal privileges unknown to almost every other industry that limit Vermont's ability to intercede.

"The health care industry is exempt from antitrust laws," he said. "It's pretty much them and Major League Baseball, and it's a major reason why there's no competition."